



The *Walk-Through* CREW

Shared leadership and a focused evaluation tool make administrators' presence in classrooms a valuable and informative part of instructional leadership.

BY JOHN SKRETTA AND VERNON FISHER

The considerable challenges of demonstrating curricular and instructional leadership in the role of the principal are well documented. Publications for educational leaders have consistently pointed out the truth of Michael Fullan's assertion that "effective instructional leaders are distinctly in the minority" (Fullan, 1991, p. 151). The demands placed on principals have never been greater, prompting such writers as Fullan to suggest that the intensified, diversified range of duties is one of the most burdensome facets of the principalship.

Establishing shared instructional leadership can help relieve some of the burden placed on principals. At

Northeast High School in Lincoln, NE, instructional leadership is not the exclusive province of the principal. The leadership team—consisting of the principal, three assistant principals, and four coordinators—conduct routine informal observations of teachers to supplement and enrich the appraisal process. The assistant principals and coordinators also fulfill many of the predictable managerial tasks routinely expected of their positions, such as building the master schedule, managing the equipment and supplies budget, and monitoring attendance and disciplinary proceedings for students. These responsibilities are significant and demand competence, knowledge, and careful attention to detail, but these responsibilities have little merit in themselves if the leadership team neglects the instructional environment.

Through establishing and maintaining consistent administrative presence in classrooms, Northeast High School's "walk-through crew" has helped renew a focus on instruction. That renewed focus has helped produce dramatic gains in standardized and criterion-referenced achievement scores for Northeast's 2,200 students. For the first time in eight years, the school's subtest scores in the district-administered achievement test (i.e., Metropolitan Achievement Test) are all above the 50th percentile. For the first time in four years, more than 70% of our freshman class finished the year having met the district proficiency requirement for reading, an increase in proficiency rate of more than 30% from just three years earlier.

Informal classroom observations translate to improved student achievement by using the observations as opportunities to develop a common language for instruction and to promote meaningful dialogue about instruction. Richardson (2001) notes that walk-throughs create "a schoolwide picture made up of many small snapshots." The walk-through observation is much more than a "pop-in, pop-out" approach to instructional leadership. The mere presence of administrators in classrooms is not enough to guarantee substantive instructional change. However, when administrators equip themselves with a walk-through instrument and give teachers specific, detailed instructional feedback based on a 3 to 10 minute informal snapshot of a lesson, the effect can be tremendous.

Figure 1

Northeast High School

Instructionally Focused For Student Achievement

Walk-Through Observation

NAME:

DATE:

TIME:

SUBJECT:

Activity:

What I observed today included:

___ Good classroom management/student centered

___ Maximizes time for learning

___ Objective/expectations stated

___ Active teaching (facilitation)

___ Appropriately planned/delivered lesson

___ Relevancy of lesson is stated

___ Student participation

___ Conducive learning environment

___ Encourages multiple perspectives

___ Demonstrates cultural sensitivity

___ Students engaged/success experienced

___ Motivation/praise

___ Critical-thinking/problem solving

___ Questioning strategies/inquiry

___ Addresses different learning styles

___ Assessment/instruction aligned

___ Pacing/sequencing

___ Varied instructional strategies

Administrative comments:

Question to ponder:

Teacher comments:

Please sign and return and a copy will be sent back to you

Administrator signature/Date

Teacher signature/Date

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STEP 1

Develop and use a common language for quality instruction.

The first step in developing the walk-through form we use at Northeast (figure 1) was to hold a summer team retreat discussion during which the administrative team wrestled over key descriptors for the quality components of instruction. The team used the district's appraisal instrument as a template and developed a checklist of indicators of effective instruction. The list was then correlated back to the district appraisal instrument to ensure its validity.

STEP 2

Establish clear and consistent expectations for the administrators' presence in classrooms and communicate these to your staff members and the school community.

The principal is the instructional steward of the school and must model the expectations for the rest of the staff. At Northeast, the principal made it into every teacher's classroom within the first week and conducted multiple walk-through observations of the teachers he was responsible for evaluating. The members of the leadership team were empowered and challenged to replicate his example with the teachers they were evaluating. On a practical note, the frequency of walk-through observations is a reflection of how user-friendly the evaluation form is. We devised a concise, user-friendly form that we can complete on the spot, either electronically on a laptop or in handwritten format.

STEP 3

Schedule informal walk-through observations as you would any other important item on your calendar.

It is unlikely that any principal or administrative team hasn't felt pressed for time and been occasionally exhausted by the managerial aspects of the job. But there is a higher purpose in instructional leadership. Establishing a daily 30-minute commitment to being a visible presence in classrooms for the benefit of students and teachers is a major step toward demonstrating moral purpose, something described by Fullan (1999) as "a value in itself." The first step is to make the walk-through a part of the daily and weekly calendar. The next step is to live with that scheduled commitment as it becomes an aspect of your leadership team's routine.

STEP 4

Use walk-throughs to promote dialogue with teachers.

At Northeast, walk-throughs are not merely about affirming good or condemning poor instructional practice. Instead, observers pose challenging questions to the teachers based on what they see in the classrooms. These questions inspire inquiry and build trust as the teacher and the administrator learn about best research-based practices and incorporate those practices in the context of individual lessons.

STEP 5

Share anecdotal feedback from walk-throughs with your faculty.

At Northeast, the anecdotal feedback enabled us to discuss what we consistently observed in classrooms, thus informing school improvement efforts. For example, walk-through observations provided evidence that instructional practice was highly auditory in nature with little shift in modalities to increase engagement for different learning styles. Teachers seldom mixed small group activities or visual components with straight lecture formats. Observers also noted that assigned readings were typically short, silent passages followed by textbook questions to confirm comprehension. After these observations, efforts to identify appropriate staff development were seen through a new lens, the lens of an instructionally focused administrative team. The results included staff development in questioning strategies, learning modalities, and the use of graphic organizers to promote reading comprehension.

From Our Context to Yours

In a summary of a survey of nearly 2,000 principals, Todd Whitaker and Elizabeth Turner (2000) note that "the real challenge that school leaders face" is to align their *stated* with their *lived* priorities. Turner and Whitaker found that although principals stated that instructional matters were their top priorities, their time was spent in other, more managerial, areas. Charging Northeast's administrative team with the responsibility and expectation of conducting informal observations has helped the team gain a clearer sense of its priorities. The implementation of the walk-through observation practice at Northeast was a significant step in the instructional leadership of the administration—and a dramatic shift in culture for teachers who had grown accustomed to seeing administrators in their classrooms on a scheduled, formal basis only. PL

References

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